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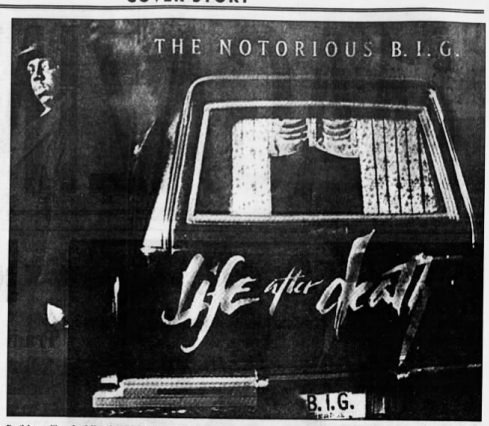
COVER STORY

Greed, status, sex, dope and death: these are the stereotypical generalizations about the genre. Yet also to be discovered are some exciting, individualistic gems on the edge. And the vulgarity of hip-hop is a welcome antidote to the lachrymose blandishments of much of today's mainstream pop



Death hovers like a cloud: Notorious B.I.G.'s album Life After Death was released just before he was gunned down.

An outlaw integrity

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I was aware that my cursory survey would lend itself to stereotyping, yet hip-hop revels in caricatures (the exaggerated pimp or gangsta or cell-block styles). It's easy to generalize. But hip-hoppers, masters of self-promotion, are prone to making sweeping statements. The themes they repeat over and over seem to be a cross between the rite-of-passage jive of Joseph Campbell's Power of Myth (so trendy in white spiritualist New Age circles) and '70s blaxploitation flicks (which Quentin Tarantino helped legitimize as pop anthropology).

Thus the hip-hop narrative is an unrelenting tale of the climb from the inner-city – and its poverty, crime, and police – for the almighty buck (and "almighty" is said in hip-hop-lingo both with irony and a straight face). No other pop genre is so devoted to the attainment of wealth as rap. What might be the most famous movie line of the decade could not have been uttered (by Tom Cruise in Jerry Maguire) without the ascendency of hip-hop: "Show me the money!"

Project Pat, who penned half his debut album behind bars, says he had no intention of becoming a rapper: "I'm hot' all about that ghetty green (money in Memphis slang)... I got into this because I seen the money, and I'm trying to get that money." Sean (Puffy) Combs, dubbed hip-hop's "ultimate p'imp-resario," explains that young acts signed to his Bad Boy label "think that they gonna be rich overnight ... because this is a place that champions the whole high lifestyle." The record labels have an ironic, iconic twist: Roc-A-Fella, Cash Money, Hostile Takeover ("Born greedy producing platinum stars").

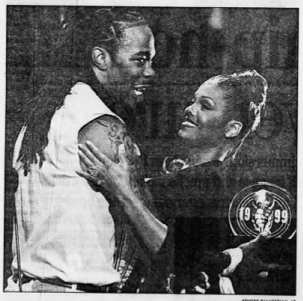
With money comes status, and sex: Notorious B.I.G.: "Used to drink brew and eat steaks / Now I sip bottles with models / Larger stakes on large estates." Rolling Stone puts Lil' Kim's Hard Core among its seminal hip-hip albums of the '90s because she "demanded shopping sprees all day and orgasms all night," her ego was "as large as her Donna-Karan-and-Dolce-&-Gabbana-draped frame was tiny" and "you could see the Benz she had parked outside the studio."

Status, says Wolfe, was "formerly associated with the well-bred" and "assumed to be quiet. These days, it often clings to the loud and the brash. Today status is acquired for the sake of status, an end in itself rather than a by-product of, or means to, something else."

Rappers' bragging rights are coveted. EPMD's first single, It's My Thang, begins: "MCs out there / You better stand clear / EPMD is a world premiere ..." Nas raps about once being "too scared to grab the mikes in the parks" but "now in every jam I'm the f*kin' man." There's an "I did it first" element to rap, which is almost comic because hip-hop is literally and figuratively about stealing, or what is euphemistically dubbed "sampling." Besides, he who lives by the sword, etc.

There's a chilling enjoy-it-while-you-can fatalism to hip-hop. If status is fleeting – "Not many last in the game," Inspectah Deck sings in Longevity – death hovers like a cloud. Notorious B.I.G. titled his albums Ready to Die and Life After Death, the latter released just before he was gunned down. (A posthumous album is titled Born Again.) A recent ad for Lost Boyz trumpets: "Until We Take Our Last Breath & The Last Note Is Played ... We'll Always Have The Last Laugh."

Naturally, fatalism is tempered by dope, a staple of creating and appreciating hip-hop. If you're wondering about the rise in marijuana usage among teenagers, consider this breathless reportage in The Source: "Slumped on the black leather couch behind him, Antonio Twice Thou smokes a blunt, furiously moving his pen across the yellow pad, writing and rewriting his verse." Two pages later, the three members of Organized Gunn Clappaz "lazily pass the remnants of a tightly rolled blunt ... Slouched deeply in their chairs, they flash stone-faced looks at the intruder (journalist) in their cipher. Starang breaks the silence, offering the weed-filled cigar as peace pipe – a timeless gesture of breaking the ice. 'Let's all have some,' he says. 'It's all good.'"



Busta Rhymes receives award for best music video from Janet Jackson at 1999 The Source Hip-Hop Awards. Pepsi has hired him to enhance Mountain Dew's "extreme" image.

And prolific hip-hop journalist Touré says – right there in the New York Freakin' Times – that one signifier of hip-hop authenticity is knowing "why Dutch Masters make better blunts than Phillies (they're thinner)." Picture plenty of pot-puffing over a four-page spread in The Source that tantalizingly asks, "Wanna know what it takes to have a watch like your local baller or favourite rapper?" Those ain't Swatches, bub: Breiting ($4,375), Gucci ($7,500), Tag Heuer ($12,000) and the diamond-encrusted Presidential Oyster by Rolex ($27,800), the kind Puff Daddy sports.

DJs at work: they are so focused on the groove they that resemble obsessed scientists seeking that one magic microbe.

Which brings us to hip-hop fashion, as booming an industry as the music itself. It's even chi-chi: the current (October) issue of Vogue devotes 23 pages to an Annie Liebowitz photo story based on Puff Daddy's debut at the Paris fashion shows.

The first thing I noticed about the September 1999 issue of The Source was how thick it was – 370 pages packed with fashion, footwear and music ads. "It ain't easy puttin' out a mag the size of some Vogue-type joint with a fraction of the staff," wrote editor Selwyn Seyfu Hinds. "But that's the hip-hop way, isn't it? Take the resources at hand and reach some unimagined high."

Turn the cover of The Source and there's Foxy Brown on the floor, uh, doggy-style in her Calvin Klein Stretch jeans, and thick diamond wrist bands. The back cover is reserved for an interracial gaggle of college students sporting gear by the ubiquitous Tommy Hilfiger, whose preppie duds were going nowhere until 1992 when Snoop Doggy Dogg wore his oversized rugby shirt on Saturday Night Live.

Hip-hop fashion is a mish-mash of blacks adopting white preppie or yuppie styles – Timberland, itself appropriated by yups as a blue-collar facsimile, is big – and whites glomming the baggy jailbird look. Plus a lot of psychedelicized neo-disco throwbacks. And hip-hop advertising is about the only place in pop media where blacks and whites enjoy social contact and sexual fantasy.

"Only a fool wouldn't judge by appearances," said Oscar Wilde. Current rap fave Jay-Z knows. In his 1998 Hard Knock Life album, according to Rolling Stone, he "took the pay cut from big-time hustler to MC in stride, spitting his smooth criminal genius in a string of dense poetics about dealing the stuff, escaping the feds and dripping in diamonds all the way to the bank." Sample lyric: "On the run-by / Gun high / One eye closed / Left holes / Through some guy clothes ..." Now he's hawking his Roc-A-Wear duds. "In our music, we talk about what we are. We wanted to make clothes that help paint the picture."

Going commercial can be a badge of honour for hip-hoppers. Violator Management boss Mona Scott has a vision to make hip-hop artists into "superstars who can have k-mds, sneakers, lipstick and blue jeans all while holding on to their street credibility." Foul-mouthed Busta Rhymes, described as the most marketable face of hip-hop, says Violator has been the best thing to happen to him. "They've secured my well-being as a person and as an artist." Scott worked tooth and nail to convince Pepsi, "a very conservative company," to hitch on to Rhymes for Mountain Dew, which has "this whole extreme image. It was about staying in there, continuing to dialogue and getting them to understand what I saw – that Busta and Mountain Dew were a perfect match ... (It) was about finding a product that represented Busta's extreme personality."

Busta's fashion line is called Bushi, slang for "bourgeois" or short for "Busta's shit." He says ingenuously: "It surprises me to see the people that are affected by what you bring, and how they feel the need to be a part of that because they see themselves in what you represent."

In a prescient 1973 essay on Funky Chic, Tom Wolfe wrote: "The conventional wisdom is that fashion is some sort of storefront that one chooses, honestly or deceptively, to place between the outside world and his 'real self.' But there is a counter notion: namely, that every person's 'real self,' his psyche, his soul, is largely the product of fashion and other outside influences on his status."

So there's an ad for RPSG Jeans Co., featuring a poem by one Ox Plus superimposed over a photo of a preppie black guy wearing a crimson bomber jacket: "My props are nonstop / My astounding urban surroundings elevate me to the rooftops / To meditate on my fate, and the date to when the bomb drops ..."

Rap and hip-hop demands and receives a knee-jerk reaction. The cultural critic Stanley Crouch – also known through his album liner notes as the alter-ego of Wynton Marsalis, the only musician to win Grammy Awards in both jazz and classical categories – reacted vociferously last month to a New York Times feature on what he termed the "doggerel of the snarling buffoons and bimbos in rap," peddling "a handful of attitudes, slang references and bad taste," who prove the "existence of an international adolescent appetite for something just above childhood and just short of adulthood, no matter the gold chains, the champagne and the limousines." He added that the "real rebels" are jazz artists who "carry themselves with taste and actual dignity."

No one would would accuse his protégé Marsalis of bad taste. The trumpeter's neo-conservative prissiness and perfection (he even slurs notes cleanly) is so antiseptic that it gives "good taste" (whatever that is) a bad name. There's something about "bad taste" and "vulgarity" that puts everything else in perspective. (Hell, I'll say it: I'm fascinated by, and like, vulgarity.) While I enjoy the supperish elegance of, say, Cole Porter, I wouldn't want to live in a world dominated by it.

While the egocentric rants of many rappers and MCs are not my cup of tea, there are many aspects of the hip-hop culture that are far more interesting than Marsalis's cultivations. It is brutal and brutally honest, even in its commercialization – no small feat. Besides, hip-hop is the perversely singular antidote to the lachrymose blandishments of much mainstream pop. It is this quality that attracts the eternal adolescent search for authenticity (If that sounds condescending, it is, brothers and sisters.)

Although I would argue that there is nothing in any genre of music like the elastic, unpredictable polyrhythms of a great jazz drummer (say, Elvin Jones), the very best DJs add a new creative hypnotic spin to rhythm. Watching them at work is something else – so focused on the groove that they seem like obsessed scientists seeking that one magic microbe that will unlock the secrets of mankind. You could say it all sounds the same – uneducated ears say this about bebop – but the DJs' deconstructions of rhythms and the hybrids of African, Arab and European forms are genuinely exciting and forward-looking. (I get the impression they haven't even scratched the surface.) And hasn't breakdancing given swish Broadway anachronisms a permanent dirt nap?

The bankrupt pop critics' establishment – pathetically and pathologically afraid of being unhip – generally gives hip-hop a free ride. That doesn't mean there aren't real individualistic gems on the edge. I'm kind of partial to the wildly idiosyncratic, hilarious new Kool Keith album Black Elvis.

Recently I was listening to a recording of Charlie (Bird) Parker bebopping in full flight, when a car rolled up beneath my window, booming thudding crushing rapping heartbeats from hell. For a fleeting random minute there, the accidental confluence of sounds, within and without, seemed right as rain.

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